

Implications of RTI for the Reading Teacher

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A while back I was making a presentation of a literacy teaching framework that I use in my work. After most of a day-long seminar, one principal looked at me sideways and said, “It isn’t your framework.”

“What do you mean?”

“The reason the kids read better. It isn’t your framework,” she repeated.

“What is it then?”

“You’re just aggressive about kids’ learning.”

No one has ever said anything nicer about me. And that is how I feel about Response to Intervention (RTI). RTI is not a specific program and you can’t buy it from a publisher. But RTI is valuable because it is a particularly effective institutional way to be aggressive about kids’ learning.

No instructional method, approach, technique, strategy, or scheme has ever been found to be 100% effective. Even in the most advantaged and highest achieving school districts some students struggle; and of course, in less advantaged schools, there are many more students who have difficulty mastering what it takes to be a reader.

Response to Intervention: A Framework for Reading Educators edited by Douglas Fuchs, Lynn S. Fuchs, and Sharon Vaughn. Copyright 2008 by the International Reading Association.

Sadly, despite the universality of the problem, schools often have not been especially energetic in their attempts to make sure that all students succeed. In the worst cases, classroom instruction can be dismal and the opportunity to get any extra help totally absent. Far more frequently, quality classroom instruction is not impossible, just hit-or-miss, and there is often some kind of additional help provided, perhaps in the form of a Title I reading class or a special education class. The research evidence on such programmatic efforts is mixed at best, suggesting that they help under some circumstances, but not under many others (Aaron, 1997; Allington, 1994; Jarvis-Janik, 1993; Swanson & Hoskyn, 1998). In some cases, these programmatic supports are simply ineffective, while other times the quality is OK, but the amount of help provided is insufficient.

RTI seems like a better solution than that usually somewhat haphazard pastiche of supports. RTI tries to make sure that classroom teaching is “up to snuff” and that when a student does falter, there will be a rich, and ultimately, sufficient instructional response to his or her reading needs.

What Counts as RTI?

Because RTI is not actually a program, there are lots of variants in what counts as RTI (National Association of State Directors of Special Education [NASDSE], 2005). There are three-tiered RTI models and four-tiered models, and even with those models not everyone agrees as to what the different tiers may refer to. So what is common to all RTI approaches? Most educators seem to accept that the first tier of response is provided to all students in the form of high-quality classroom teaching, and the final tier means moving the student into a highly targeted and supportive special education program—but the number and type of interventions and supports in the middle varies greatly. The middle tier(s) may include extra instruction within the classroom by the regular classroom teacher, or

there may be extra help from a different teacher beyond what can be provided in the classroom, and such help might be given even beyond the school day or the school year. Let it suffice that in RTI there is classroom instruction for all, a rich and varied menu of additional help in the middle for those who struggle, and special education of some form for those who do not respond adequately to the additional help (hence “response to intervention” is the gatekeeper to special education, because if the student is learning adequately from the improvements that are provided there is presumably no need for a special education placement).

Another point held in common among various RTI conceptions is the use of student assessment data to make decisions, and that there will be planning on the basis of this evidence to provide the best and most appropriate response to the students’ needs (NASDSE, 2005). The successful use of RTI requires the involvement of a team of professional educators who, together, try to meet every student’s needs. Neither teachers nor students can be isolated in RTI because the increasing intensification of these efforts requires the coordination of the skills and involvement of a variety of professionals, including reading professionals.

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The purpose of this chapter is to consider the role of the reading teacher in successful RTI programs. First, I will explore the varied roles that reading professionals take within schools and then will consider what reading teachers have to offer to help make RTI an effective instructional response to students’ learning needs.

The Nature of Reading Professionals

There are many kinds of reading professionals: reading teachers, remedial reading teachers, reading specialists, literacy coaches, reading resource specialists, and so on (Bean, 2003; Dole, Liang,

Watkins, & Wiggins, 2006). Districts and states differ in how and if they use these designations and so the approach taken here is to be inclusive—any reading professionals whose duties range beyond the scope of the regular classroom teacher (classroom reading teachers are critical as well, but their role is already addressed in Chapter 4). This consideration of the potential contributions of reading professionals in RTI is not limited to any particular job category or title, as reading teachers can play an important role within RTI efforts regardless of their actual job titles. If there is any doubt whether a particular job category falls within the scope of this chapter, I would assume that it does.

Districts and states differ not only in how reading professionals are referred to, but they also have varied requirements for the preparation of these teachers (Bean, 2003; Dole et al., 2006). Reading teachers should be included in RTI decision making and program implementation because of their specialized and deep knowledge in the teaching of reading. The whole idea of RTI is to improve and intensify the education provided to students who have trouble learning, and accordingly, the teachers who are helping guide the decisions for how to do this best must possess a great deal of knowledge about the teaching of reading—there would be no good reason for inviting them to the table otherwise. Unfortunately, some schools do manage to hire reading teachers or coaches without adequate or appropriate professional preparation. Although this chapter attempts to be inclusive of the varied titles used to designate reading professionals, it is not equally broadminded about the value of substantial preparation for these individuals. Knowledgeable reading teachers can play an important role in many aspects of RTI; those with a title and inadequate preparation cannot. The International Reading Association (IRA) has issued various documents on preparation standards for reading professionals of various types, and these can serve as a good starting point for ensuring that reading teachers have the knowledge and skills needed to successfully improve a school reading program (IRA, 2000a, 2000b, 2003, 2004).

Reading teachers should have a substantial understanding of the developmental continuum of learning to read. Such teachers should know how to support decoding and the phonological skills underlying decoding, as well as reading fluency, vocabulary, comprehension strategies, and the maintenance of reading

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motivation. They should also have a firm grasp of sound assessment strategies and procedures, as well as an understanding of instructional texts and other materials that can support the successful teaching of reading. Typically, reading teachers have a special knowledge of the needs of struggling readers, and such teachers have often had extensive practicum experience and guidance in how to help such students to progress.

Reading professionals also vary in the functions they play within schools. This variation takes place along a continuum, from services for teachers and other professionals to the direct delivery of instruction to the students themselves (Bean, 2003). Those duties might include providing professional development for teachers, reading instruction for struggling learners, diagnosis and assessment services, and supervision for the school reading program. The purpose of this chapter is not to try to recommend what the best combination of services may be, but to recognize the diversity of roles often played by reading teachers. Because several of these roles or functions are specifically relevant to RTI, and if carried out well, would help schools to do a better job in teaching students to read, this chapter will explore a varied agenda of contributions that the reading teacher could make. I am not recommending that all reading teachers try to do all of these things, but many of the duties that are included in the reading teachers' job could be an important asset to a successful RTI effort.

Providing Professional Development

The idea of reading coaches or literacy coaches has certainly caught on (Dole et al., 2006). Increasing numbers of reading professionals are in jobs that focus wholly or largely on providing professional development to other teachers. The first order of business in making sure that students do well in learning to read is to make sure that classroom instruction is of reasonably high quality. High-quality classroom reading instruction has many dimensions, but none is more important than a well-prepared teacher.

In efforts to make certain that classroom teaching is good enough to succeed with most students, the reading coach can be extremely useful (Sykes, 1999). Coaches, by the nature of their duties, must spend a lot of time in other teachers' classrooms. This time is spent observing and giving feedback (coaching or mentoring) and doing demonstration lessons and the like.

Coaching efforts of this type can be general, of course, with the coach simply helping teachers to deliver a reading program. Over time, one would hope that such coaching would get more purposeful and data based. For instance, one possibility is for coaches to focus on making sure that teachers know how to teach all the key elements of reading (e.g., phonics, fluency, comprehension) or how to use a particular core program effectively. However, another possibility would be to look at the assessment data collected on

students in the various classrooms. Looking at these data for the whole school or for particular grade levels can be informative. Are there particular patterns to the weaknesses? If the students in one class aren't doing very well with some aspect of literacy learning, but students in another class are, this might suggest the need for



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more targeted support for that one teacher in whatever the gap may be. On the other hand, perhaps the assessment would reveal that students generally are doing better with some aspect of reading but not so well with another—that might suggest a schoolwide effort to improve teaching in the lagging area of concern.

Coaching is often focused on a teachers' overall instructional performance. This means that a coach working with a teacher on fluency might put the main emphasis on making certain that the teacher knew effective methods for teaching fluency, that he or she had appropriate materials, that enough fluency time was scheduled, and so on. That is a very appropriate way to mentor. However, in the context of RTI, the coach might take a very different approach. Perhaps the classroom teacher is providing reasonably high-quality fluency instruction and that only a handful of the students are struggling in this area. In that context, it is possible for the coach to provide a more targeted kind of assistance. Rather than trying to improve fluency instruction overall, perhaps the coach will observe the experiences of the students who are not doing well. That kind of focused observation might reveal specific weaknesses in how students are partnered for paired reading, or what the match of the student is to the text, or how much opportunity those students get to respond or participate within the lessons, or the amount or type of guidance provided to the students by the teacher. Changing these teaching behaviors can be hard work and a coach can help the teacher to work out an improvement plan and facilitate its implementation. This kind of support is not an instructional intervention, but it can be instrumental in improving the reading instruction provided to struggling readers.

Classroom teachers differ in how successful they are in delivering lessons. These differences can be evident from observing classroom practices alone. For instance, effective phonics lessons provide students with time to decode words or write from dictation—to actually practice the decoding and encoding. When visiting a classroom, a coach may recognize the lack of such

elements within a lesson and would require no data beyond what was seen in order to help the teacher to do better. But what if the instruction seems to be good, but just isn't working for some students? That's where learning data comes in. Classrooms usually differ in the proportion of students who are succeeding with particular aspects of instruction. For example, an examination of the phonemic awareness data from several kindergarten classes after several weeks of teaching revealed that as few as 6 of 20 students were struggling in some classrooms, and as many as 18 of 20 in some others. Knowing these proportions would allow the coach to target his or her efforts, and they might lead to some guided observations by the less successful teachers in the more effective classrooms.

One of the hardest things for classroom teachers to do is to provide differentiated instruction for students. Such instruction might involve the teacher providing special lessons to certain students who are having difficulty learning. The lessons themselves may not pose any special challenge for the teacher—in fact, these could be the same lessons taught previously, but now with greater focus and intensity because of being offered in a small-group context as opposed to a classroom context.

The coach can also help out in the interpretation of data, both on a within-class and across-school basis. In order for RTI to work effectively, teachers have to be able to make sound decisions about student needs. Who is failing to learn adequately? With what are they having difficulty? What would be a sound and efficient response to the pattern of needs being displayed? The reading teacher can be a useful partner in interpreting such data and translating them into sound instructional practice.

In all of these examples, the reading specialist is enhancing RTI by improving the basic classroom instruction or the within-class intervention efforts of those classroom teachers. But the specialists can also have a positive impact on the special education programs as well. Special education teachers, because of the range of

responsibilities they hold, are by necessity generalists. That means that the reading teacher will likely know more about reading curriculum and instruction per se and can make valuable professional development contributions to the teachers in the special education programs. The increasing attention to the professional development duties of reading teachers has resulted in the development of a rich collection of resource guides that can help reading teachers with this part of the work (Bean, 2003; Hasbrouck & Denton, 2005; Toll, 2004; Walpole & McKenna, 2004; Wepner, Strickland, & Feeley, 2002).

Providing Reading Interventions

One of the hallmarks of RTI is that instructional interventions are provided against which student learning can be evaluated. Reading teachers can be invaluable for their ability to provide high-quality instruction to children who are having difficulty learning to read. There are many examples in the research literature in which students are provided this kind of teaching to good effect (e.g., Blachman et al., 2004; Fisher & Blachowicz, 2005; Hatcher et al., 2006; Linan-Thompson & Hickman-Davis, 2002; Mathes et al., 2005; O'Connor & Simic, 2002; Shanahan & Barr, 1995; Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, & Hickman, 2003). Such instruction has been found to improve children's reading achievement, to reduce special education placements, and the effects of such efforts can be long lived.

Interventions can take many forms, and reading teachers can successfully contribute to a plethora of such efforts. For example, it was noted in the previous section that students can get additional help right in their own classroom. Such support could be provided by the classroom teacher, as in the example, but perhaps this would be impossible—either because of the extensiveness of the problems or the abilities of the classroom teacher. In any event, there is no

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reason why the remedial work of the reading specialist has to be implemented outside of the classroom. So-called “push-in” programs, in which a reading teacher comes into the classroom to deliver instruction or support on a targeted basis, can be very effective (Gelzheiser, Meyers, & Pruzek, 1992).

For such instruction to work, it is essential that it truly be targeted and based on student learning data. This kind of teaching must be well planned and carefully coordinated with the instruction provided by the classroom teacher. Speculation about the failure of many pull-out programs suggests that one reason why things haven’t always worked well is a lack of sufficient coordination (Allington, 1994; Davis & Wilson, 1999). If the classroom teacher and the reading teacher use separate curricula and separate materials, the extra teaching is unlikely to help the struggling students learn what they need to do well in the classroom. Of course, if the reading teacher is coming into the classroom, the need for coordination becomes even greater in order to avoid confusion.

Push-in services may take two different forms. One is to have the reading teacher sit with one or more students during lessons delivered by the classroom teacher, to individually guide them to better understand and gain from the instruction being provided to all the students. Another possibility is for the reading teacher to work separately with one or more students in need, providing intensive reteaching of the lessons on which the students are struggling.

In many schools, pull-out programs are preferred. In these efforts the students who have been identified as being in need of extra help travel from their classroom to another place within the school where the reading teacher plies his or her trade. These kinds of programs offer the reading teacher greater opportunity for

flexibility in providing for students' needs and allow for the combination of students with similar needs from different classrooms. Of course, sometimes teachers don't work well together collaboratively, and this problem can be minimized by having the classroom teacher and the reading teacher working within separate facilities. Finally, in some cases students slip so far behind that the instructional assistance doesn't match well with the classroom instruction, so a pull-out situation can make it easier to provide instruction that closely matches student need.

Great care is needed to ensure that the intervention instruction, no matter how it is delivered, will be sufficient to improve students' reading skills and to provide a sufficient test of student responsiveness to intervention. The importance of coordination and collaboration between the classroom program and the extra instruction has already been noted, as has the need to use student data in targeting instruction, monitoring success, and guiding teaching. There are four additional key elements to making these intervention programs successful.

INCREASED AMOUNT OF TEACHING. One of the most important goals of a reading intervention implementation is that it provides additional instruction to the students (Gest & Gest, 2005; Linan-Thompson & Hickman-Davis, 2002). In the best of circumstances, this means that the help the reading teacher is giving should be coordinated in such a way so that it is extra teaching rather than replacement teaching. This might mean a school must schedule the teaching of reading at different times of the day for students at different grade levels or in different parts of the building. For instance, the primary-grade teachers might agree to teach reading in the morning, opening up the afternoons for extra instruction with the reading teacher, while the upper-grade teachers might agree to a reverse schedule. Too often the help that reading teachers provide is not managed in this manner, and so it replaces classroom instruction entirely or partially rather than supplementing it. In some cases, the

lack of a clear scheduling plan actually leads to a reduction in teaching for the target students rather than an increase. For instance, let's say a classroom teacher teaches reading from 9:00 a.m. until 11:00 a.m. The reading teacher offers to give 30 minutes of extra help to three of the students in this class at 9:30. Often the classroom teacher will then not have these students participate in the first part of the class lesson, because they won't be able to finish, and additional time can be lost during the classroom transfer itself. Of course, increases in available instructional time can be accomplished by scheduling some of these services beyond the school day or school year.

TARGETED TEACHING. Another way the reading teacher can increase the chances of learning success is by making certain that the instructional help is well targeted on a student's greatest learning needs. In the regular classroom, a teacher has to try to teach all of the key skills and abilities commensurate with reading at the levels being taught. Because of the range of abilities and levels likely in a regular classroom, the teacher has to provide a thorough coverage of reading. This same kind of balanced approach is possible in a reading intervention, and such efforts have been effective (Manset-Williamson & Nelson, 2005). In a special reading class, however, the teacher can emphasize whatever part of the process a particular group of students is struggling with most (Fisher & Blachowicz, 2005). So if there are some kids who, despite receiving fluency help in the classroom, are still struggling, extra fluency instruction could be provided. Research has demonstrated that such targeted instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency, reading comprehension, or vocabulary—when added to a comprehensive course of instruction—can have a positive impact on reading achievement, both in the individual skill and in more generalized measures of literacy, too (NICHD, 2000).

In some cases, students lag behind in several skills simultaneously, but even in these instances it is possible that the

reading teacher can offer the greatest assistance by targeting his or her efforts based on the student's relative pattern of performance. First-grade readers have to make clear gains in both decoding and fluency, but if students at this level are falling behind in both areas it is most immediately important to close the decoding gap and to target the extra instruction accordingly. Reading instruction that carefully prioritizes student needs and then changes these priorities on the basis of student learning progress is more likely to be helpful.

ADJUSTMENT OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEVEL. Another way the reading teacher can improve upon the classroom instruction is to vary the level of the teaching. When students are matched with materials that are too hard for them, it is difficult for students to make maximum progress (Faulkner & Levy, 1994; Hiebert, 2005; Morgan, Wilcox, & Eldredge, 2000; O'Connor et al., 2002; Shanahan, 1983). Classroom teachers can vary text levels to some extent, but it is often the case that students—especially struggling students—spend at least part of their instructional time working with materials from which they cannot make maximum gains because of the level of the material. In a special teaching situation, especially one that is meant to evaluate the students' responsiveness to teaching, it is imperative that text be better matched to student needs.

INTENSITY OF INSTRUCTION. Finally, reading teachers should make sure to boost the intensity of instruction. In classroom teaching, most of the time must be spent in whole-class or small-group teaching. One way of increasing learning is to make the size of the group small enough that student attention is captured as fully as possible and student engagement and responsiveness grow (Shanahan, 1998; Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, Kouzekanani, et al., 2003). When a kindergarten teacher is working with children on phonemic awareness, it is possible for students not to grasp the point of the lesson simply because of their inattention. However, when a reading teacher sits down with three kindergartners to provide such teaching,

all of the those students will likely be able to see the teacher's lips and to hear the sounds more distinctly because of the reduction in distractions and interference. Students in such situations should be expected to respond more often than would be possible in a larger group situation, and reading teachers must take care to ensure that their lessons—usually delivered in advantaged situations in comparison to the regular classroom—make use of this added resource. Similarly, such small-group teaching increases the possibility of the teacher noticing any confusion or lack of understanding and to correct it immediately (again, something much harder for a classroom teacher to do).

This kind of special reading instruction can be delivered in a small group or even on a one-to-one basis. In any case, the degree to which the intensity of instruction can be increased has to be balanced with the need being addressed. It is not always necessary to teach the same way all the time. For example, one-to-one help for a student makes greater sense when something new is being taught (like a comprehension strategy, for instance), and group work makes greater sense once that strategy is understood and the student needs to practice and refine it in order to accomplish mastery.

Of course, there is no question that students benefit most when they receive help from a well-prepared and knowledgeable teacher, and it would be ideal if we could provide such teachers to all struggling students. Unfortunately, the reading case loads are inordinately extensive at some schools and the ability of a reading teacher to meet the needs of so many students would simply be impossible. However, research has shown that a skilled reading teacher can successfully organize, oversee, and guide the work of paraprofessionals and volunteers (Brown, Morris, & Fields, 2005; Morris, 2005). In such efforts, the direct instruction to students is being provided by the paraprofessionals, but within the planning and supervision of the reading teacher. It is not that the reading teacher delivers no direct instruction to students in these contexts, only that such teaching makes up a modest share of the extra help

that the students get (but arranged so that the students get maximum benefit from the reading teacher's expertise and so that the paraprofessionals are not trying to make many professional judgments).

Summary

RTI efforts depend upon the expertise of many professionals within a school. This chapter has considered what role the reading teacher, coach, or specialist might play in this process. Generally, reading professionals can help improve classroom reading instruction through the professional development, coaching, or mentoring that they can offer to classroom teachers. Furthermore, reading teachers can provide high-quality reading interventions that raise reading achievement and provide an adequate test against which to evaluate a student's response to intervention. Such instruction needs to (1) coordinate carefully with classroom reading instruction, (2) be based on student performance data, (3) increase the amount of teaching students receive, (4) emphasize specific student learning needs, (5) be adjusted to student reading level, and (6) be of sufficient intensity that student learning results. Reading teachers are essential for an effective RTI program.

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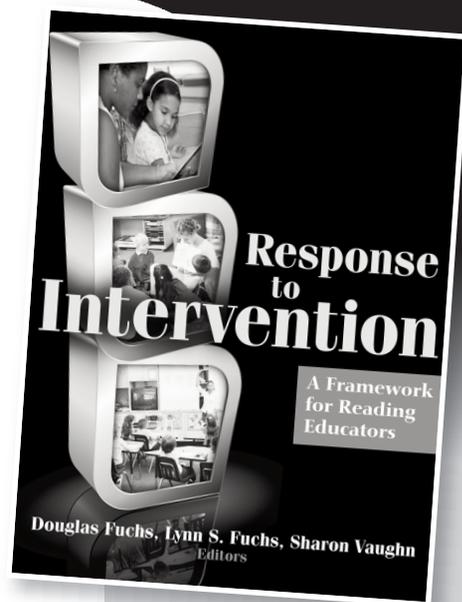
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